

Building Capacity for Accelerated Reform: The Fresno–Long Beach Learning Partnership as a Leadership Strategy

California Collaborative on District Reform

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About this series

This brief is the second in a series exploring the promise and challenge of the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership. This project is funded by grants from the Stuart Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation.

Introduction

In order to move their organizations forward, many leaders are aware that they must have clearly defined goals, use data to measure progress toward those goals, adopt appropriate change management strategies, strengthen governance teams, and support the development of other leaders in the system (see, for example, Waters & Marzano, 2006). The superintendents of Fresno Unified School District and Long Beach Unified School District have established a unique partnership that they can leverage to deepen their own leadership practice and develop the leadership of others throughout their systems.

This second in a series of briefs on the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership focuses on the leadership practices of Fresno Unified Superintendent Michael Hanson and Long Beach Unified Superintendent Christopher Steinhauer and the ways in which their partnership strengthens the strategies they employ. We describe the vision and commitments that serve as the initial foundation for their work together and suggest various ways that the Partnership enhances leadership practices

in both districts. To do this, we draw upon analysis of data collected over nearly two years, including interviews with key district leaders and stakeholders outside of the districts, attendance at district meetings, and analyses of key district documents.

This brief highlights the ways the Partnership strengthens the following leadership practices:

- Modeling a commitment to student learning
- Creating high-quality professional learning opportunities for district leadership team members
- Leveraging resources strategically
- Using data to support continuous improvement

Below, we explain how their cross-district activities strengthen those leadership practices and discuss the ongoing challenges that the Partnership faces, including the ways in which district-level activities will translate into classroom practices.

About the Partnership

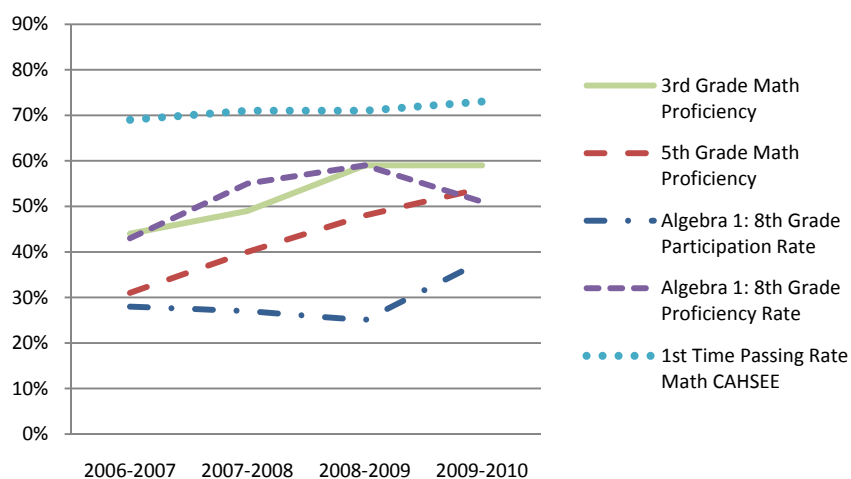
Established in 2008, the Fresno–Long Beach Learning Partnership is a collaboration that aims to accelerate achievement for all students and close achievement gaps by capitalizing on shared systemic capacity-building across two high-need districts. The Partnership grew from a collegial relationship that had developed between superintendents Mike Hanson (Fresno) and Chris Steinhauser (Long Beach) through their involvement in the California Collaborative on District Reform, the Urban Education Dialogue, and other professional networks. The districts agreed that their common goal should be to “prepare all students to be ready for success in higher education or a career with significant economic growth potential.” To achieve that goal, the Partnership focused on three core areas for improvement: mathematics, English learner education, and leadership development. (See Duffy, Brown, & O’Day, 2009, for a detailed description of the early stages of the Partnership.)

The joint work of the two districts includes examining district data and sharing best practices and district resources. District leaders meet face-to-face quarterly to track the extent to which their strategic reforms are proving effective. In between these meetings, district leaders share best practices and resources designed to accelerate the progress of the reforms. These include joint site and classroom visits, training for instructional coaches and principals, joint development of benchmark assessments, collaboration on grant proposals and new reform initiatives, and sharing of services offered by third-party providers.

Figures 1 and 2 provide five data trends that both districts track in mathematics (note that the algebra proficiency rates are calculated differently from the other data; they can be used to gauge change over time but cannot be compared against the other data). These figures include just some of the achievement patterns that Partnership members discuss during quarterly meetings. Although the context for these challenges varies across districts, both districts have gaps they are trying to narrow together through their collective problem solving.¹

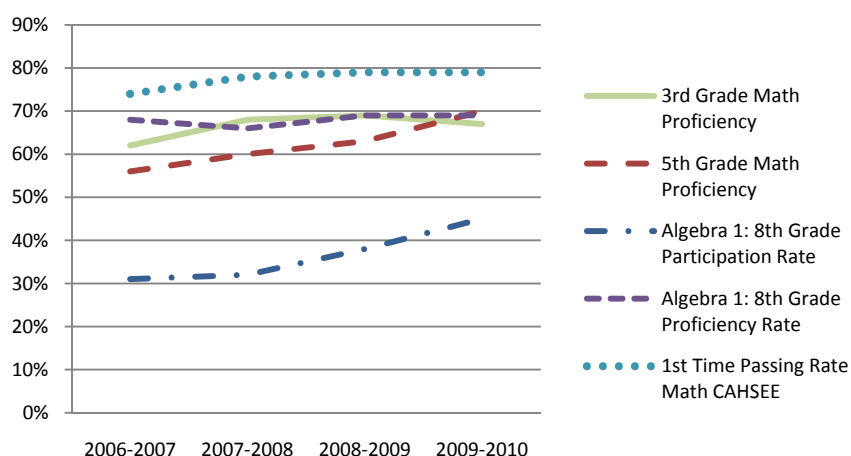
Our observations indicate that the Fresno–Long Beach Learning Partnership may provide a promising strategy for other districts and schools to use to share resources and build environments in which improvement efforts are deepened and sustained. Thus, the Partnership may have lessons for state policymakers charged with finding strategies to accelerate the pace of improvement in a climate of diminishing resources.

Figure 1. Fresno Unified Student Achievement Trend²



² Algebra 1 participation rates are calculated as a percentage of all eighth grade students. Algebra participation rates are calculated as a percentage of eighth grade students enrolled in Algebra 1.

Figure 2. Long Beach Unified Student Achievement Trend³



³ Algebra 1 participation rates are calculated as a percentage of all eighth grade students. Algebra participation rates are calculated as a percentage of eighth grade students enrolled in Algebra 1.

Source: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

¹ 2009–2010 enrollment data for both districts can be found after November 30, 2010 at: <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>. Budget figures for 2009–2010 can be found at <http://www.Ed-Data.k12.ca.us>.

Leadership Practices in the Fresno–Long Beach Learning Partnership

This brief addresses the ways the Partnership supports the overall leadership strategies of both superintendents. The Partnership provides a vehicle to develop district-level leadership teams that can accelerate progress toward shared goals.

Modeling a Commitment to Student Learning

Many policymakers and practitioners attribute the success of the Partnership to the strong professional relationship between the two superintendents. This professional relationship is grounded, in part, in the common purpose and direction that they envision for their districts. Both share a deep commitment to equity and access so that all students have equal opportunities for educational success.

Although the vision and commitment that Hanson and Steinhauser share may indeed have formed an initial foundation for the Partnership, the lessons of their collaboration go beyond the close ties between these two individual leaders. The Partnership helps them maintain their focus on their common goals and provides opportunities for them to take their work to deeper levels. As we pointed out in our first brief (see Duffy, Brown, & O'Day, 2009), both superintendents model this commitment by tying their own evaluations to progress on specific indicators. As Steinhauser explained, "Every day of our work, we have to lead by example."

Creating High-Quality Professional Learning Opportunities for District Leadership Team Members

The Partnership also strengthens opportunities to develop the leadership capacity of mid-level managers in both districts by providing a forum for professional learning. According to Hanson, the Partnership has put district staff in control of their professional learning in a more organic way than would be found in a more traditional supervisory process: "I think it's been rather dramatic that our folks would rather turn to colleagues in another district who are struggling with similar issues and figure it out together than they would have someone try to come in and tell them how to do it." As a result, the Partnership provides district staff with a broader context for their work.

"The Partnership gives us double the opportunity to see things happen in real time," Hanson says.

He explains that the Partnership creates a much larger arena where leaders learn how to lead. Both superintendents agree that the Partnership provides a forum where they can learn. It also gives them a place to support other district leaders, and it anchors their work in shared challenges and problem solving.

The result is an increasingly common expectation that these professional learning opportunities contribute to how work gets done in both districts. This expectation seems to be one factor that will institutionalize the work of the Partnership and support its sustainability. According to Steinhauser, thinking about the sustainability of the Partnership is essential: "Any one of us can be gone in a flash," he explains. "It's really about distributed leadership. There are multiple leaders who are carrying out the work and meeting on a daily basis, talking about next steps. My role is to remove the barriers and perhaps push people a little more in their thinking."

Indeed, the district staff we interviewed agreed that the Partnership has become an essential aspect of their own professional development. Because of the ongoing nature of their collaboration, the Partnership offers deeper learning opportunities than other professional networks. District staff members also pointed out that since its inception, the Partnership has evolved and has become an integral part of their district systems.

All of those with whom we spoke talked about the importance of integrating this Partnership into their day-to-day work. One district leader from Fresno indicated that the Partnership is a vehicle for deepening their work, even beyond the three strategic focus areas of mathematics, English learners, and leadership development: "The Partnership is a gateway for more district conversations about our work. We're doing more of that district-to-district communication." Another said, "Having the Partnership helps us—not just deal with our internal issues but also look outside of ourselves for the compass to keep us focused."

Leveraging Resources Strategically

The Fresno–Long Beach Learning Partnership has emerged in the midst of one of the worst budget crises in California's history. Fortunately, the Partnership has enabled both districts to work more efficiently in a resource-challenged

environment than each would have been able to do alone. The Partnership's strategic use of resources includes systems alignment; resource allocation, including time; and shared learning and expertise.

Systems Alignment. Systems alignment is addressed through efforts to bridge the “white space” on district organization charts in order to reduce the “silo effect” that characterizes many bureaucratic organizations. The Partnership has helped to strengthen the alignment of resources with district goals by carefully identifying the different parts of the system whose cooperation and collaboration are critical to achieving district goals. The quarterly meetings often include leaders from other areas—such as human resources, information systems, and business services—so that the different departments are not operating at cross-purposes.

“Having the Partnership helps us—not just deal with our internal issues but also look outside of ourselves for the compass to keep us focused.”

In addition, although the three strands (mathematics, English learner instruction, and leadership development) of district work were initially somewhat separate, important overlaps are now emerging across the three strands as both districts increase their focus on middle school mathematics achievement.

Resource Allocation. Both superintendents emphasize the importance of aligning resources with their shared goals. Hanson cites the importance of having a “unified voice around improving achievement of kids and then putting some energy behind doing something about it.” He stresses that resource allocation is one way he can communicate his priorities. Both superintendents have won support for their shared reform strategies by using the Partnership to pool resources and use them more flexibly. These resources include time, sharing lessons and processes, and sharing expertise.

- **Time.** One important resource for district leaders is time. Because of the Partnership, both superintendents are confident that they speak with one voice on behalf of the 160,000 students across their districts. This professional connection allows them to

simultaneously attend different meetings—sometimes in different states—that will impact district work. For example, one superintendent opted to attend a funder’s meeting of grantee districts while the other attended meetings related to California’s adoption of the Common Core State Standards and California’s Race to the Top application. “I peeled off and spent Tuesday in Sacramento, and we didn’t even discuss it,” said Hanson. “He figured out I was in California without talking about it, and we’ll circle around to touch base.”

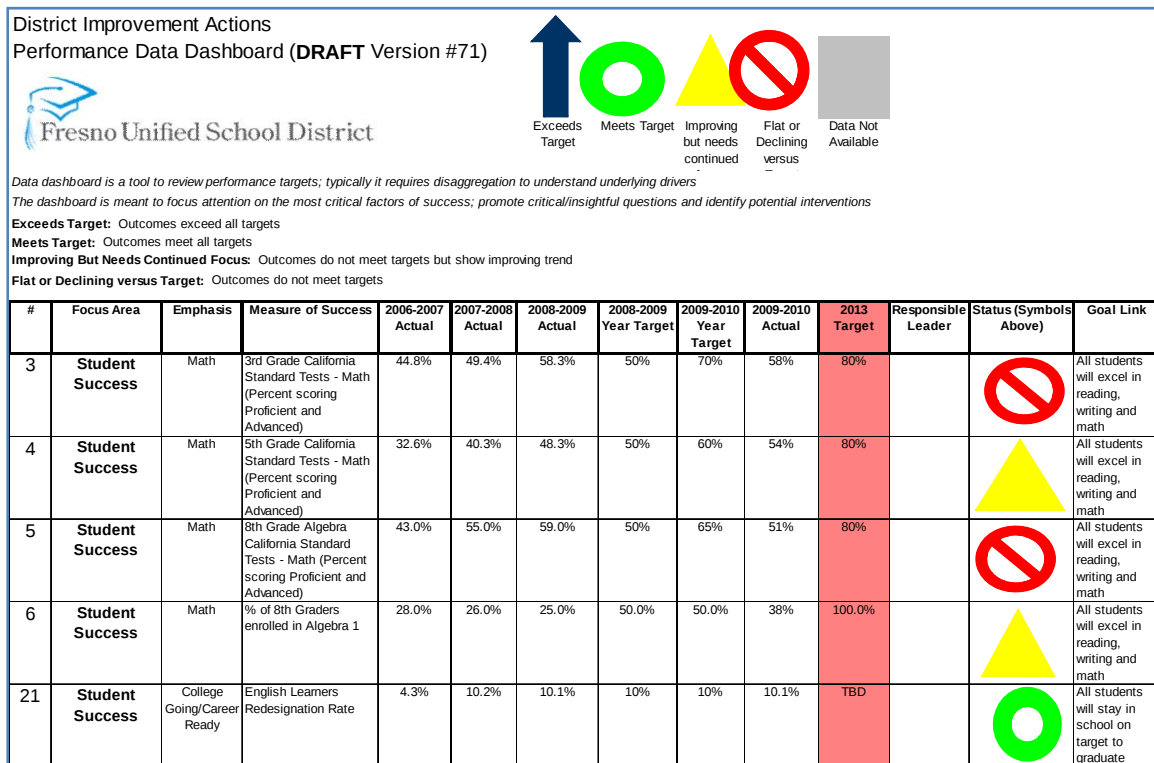
- **Shared Learning, Resources, and Processes.** Other examples of leveraging resources strategically include the superintendents’ willingness to provide district leaders with professional development opportunities and to share resources and processes that they have developed. For example, Fresno’s Associate Superintendent of Equity and Access, Jorge Aguilar, is developing database tools containing student transcript information from the University of California’s Transcript Evaluation Service to determine whether students are on track to graduate with the widest array of college and career options possible. Aguilar has shared this system for monitoring course-taking patterns with Long Beach, along with a set of case studies that support the need for such systems.
- **Shared Expertise.** The sharing of specific leadership expertise is something that the superintendents hope to expand. For example, there has been some discussion about inviting leaders from one district to serve in leadership capacities in the other district for extended periods. The opportunity for district staff to learn how different systems operate and to provide their expertise in different contexts can also develop the capacity of leadership team members. Thus, the Partnership allows the superintendents not only to leverage a much broader set of resources but also to provide new ways to develop their own leadership team members’ capacity.

Using Data to Support Continuous Improvement

Another important leadership practice that the Partnership supports is the creation of learning communities that use data to determine what is working and where improvements are needed. In this regard, there are two areas in which the Partnership has added value to individual district practices that emphasize the use of data.

First, district partners share data management practices. Each district has developed its own “data dashboard” based on the district’s unique needs. (For screenshots of the two dashboards, see Figures 3 and 4.) The Partnership has allowed them to share those monitoring systems with one another and adopt practices that fit within their communities and enhance prior practices.

Figure 3. Screenshot of Fresno Unified School District Data Dashboard

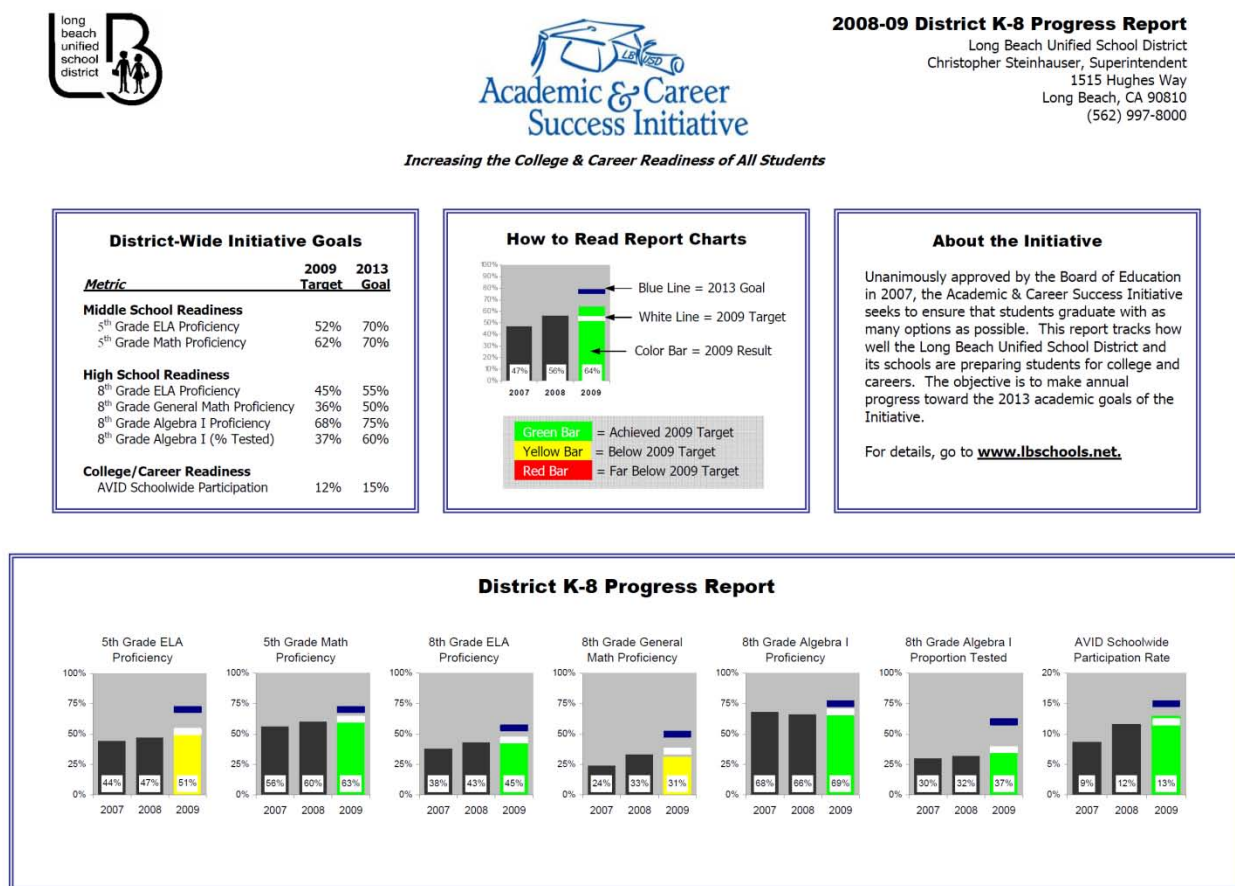


Data management began with the identification of specific trailing indicators (such as test scores) and leading indicators (such as participation in professional development activities) to monitor progress. Each district developed data dashboards that address their individual district needs, align with the goals of the Partnership and contain those trailing and leading indicators.

Through their Partnership, district leaders have been able to learn from each other and make adjustments based on their needs. “We took what

we liked,” said Steinhauer, “It had to work for us, based on the input that we gathered from our stakeholders.” One district had done work with trend data, and the other had used a different set of metrics. Each district took on some of the practices of the other district to develop indicators that worked for their needs, communities, and goals.

Figure 4. Screenshot of Long Beach Unified School District Data Dashboard



Second, the Partnership itself serves as a larger professional learning community whose members compare data across districts to identify larger patterns in student achievement and promising practices. As district leaders chose the indicators, they tracked student achievement through the lens of equity and access so they could identify performance patterns for all student groups over time.

Each quarterly meeting of the Partnership includes a deep dive into one of the three core focus areas. Examining their data together allows district leaders to celebrate their successes and pose tough questions about their progress, which deepens the work in both districts. Thus, in addition to the specific practices associated with monitoring progress, both districts benefit from comparing data across their systems. Such comparisons enable the districts to use data to

spot larger problems and then identify practices that might support improvement. This kind of side-by-side sharing and joint problem solving represents a different kind of innovation than simply sharing or adopting one another's practices. This joint work takes time and rests on the solid relationships that have been built across district leadership team members.

Long Beach has benefitted from looking at data trends across multiple districts. For example, after comparing its own student achievement data with data from Fresno, Long Beach noted that although its sixth-grade mathematics scores might be higher than Fresno's, Long Beach had a much greater drop in scores from fifth to sixth grade than Fresno. "What's the one difference? Self-contained sixth-grade classes," explained Steinhauser. So in 2009–10, Long Beach piloted self-contained sixth-grade classes in all of its

middle schools identified for Program Improvement.

Steinhauser notes the power of sharing data from other districts such as Fresno. He used their data, along with data from another neighboring district to convince Long Beach school leaders to pilot the self-contained classes: “I met with the principals, and some of the principals were not truly happy about everybody doing it. I said, ‘Let’s take the data.’ I just threw out questions and said, ‘What do we notice about these data?’ And, well, they came up with the answers themselves.” In this way, Steinhauser says, “we’re using [Fresno] to change our school system and [Fresno is] using our system to change their system.” Both districts point to the “data-centric” nature of the Partnership as one reason for its success.

Both Hanson and Steinhauser believe their shared emphasis on building a broad learning community (the Partnership) and smaller learning communities (within each district) has accelerated the progress of both districts. Referring to the

work in mathematics, Steinhauser cites the example of mathematics coaches from Fresno and Long Beach who jointly developed assessments that provide valuable data on students’ progress. As the mathematics coaches examined student performance on common assessments, they learned that students in both districts had similar problems. Initially, the coaches assumed the challenges were related to the algebra readiness textbooks used in their individual districts. But because students from both districts experienced similar challenges even though the districts had adopted different textbooks, the coaches saw that it was not so much a problem with the textbook; instead, according to Steinhauser, it was a “systematic problem statewide. The grade-level expectations are way too low.” Steinhauser emphasizes the combined power of the two districts: “If we were by ourselves, we’d only have one set of individuals in this system working on it. In this case, we have two whole systems talking about what’s working and what’s not working.”

Extending the Voices of District Leaders Across the State

During the past two years, the superintendents have been increasingly visible at state and federal policymaking meetings. They have worked together with a widening group of colleagues to secure the funding flexibility they believe is essential so that resources can be better aligned to their core reform strategies. Because their efforts through the Partnership represent nearly 160,000 California students, their interests in gaining greater flexibility and serving in a support role to each other have gained the attention of the State Board of Education, the California Department of Education, the Legislature, and the Governor’s office. These different groups see the Partnership as an innovative strategy for addressing both student achievement and scarcity of resource issues.

As the Partnership matures, its effects are not only taking root down through the two districts but also are rippling outward to other districts. The recent collaboration among seven California districts (Clovis, Fresno, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Sanger) to apply for the second round of Race to the Top funding is an outgrowth of the leaders in the Partnership. Their work in the Partnership

directly led to their being asked to be part of a consortium of districts willing to take on the challenges of putting forward a second California application for Race to the Top funds. Although the seven districts are disappointed that they did not secure funding from Race to the Top, this cross-district collaboration will continue—even without those funds. Together, this larger partnership will take on challenges such as teacher and principal evaluations. This larger consortium of districts can learn from the early efforts of Fresno and Long Beach.

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Challenges

Despite the promise of a partnership such as this, a number of challenges remain—challenges for those who would seek to collaborate in this way and for the Fresno–Long Beach Learning Partnership itself. These challenges include building leadership at the school level, learning about each other's systems, ensuring staff and governance stability, meeting fiscal challenges, and seeking policy support.

Building Leadership at the School Level

Although the development of district-level leadership teams is essential to systemic growth, it remains unclear what impact the Partnership will have on the development of school-level instructional leadership. Our observations suggest that many of the same practices at work at the district level should be applied at the school level if the districts are going to experience lasting impacts on student achievement. Developing instructional leaders is one of the key focal areas of the Partnership's work. Working across their different contexts, both districts have struggled to find valid and reliable measures of effective leadership. Such measures are of critical importance for the persistently underperforming schools in both districts.

Some district staff members said that their districts might better support the development of instructional leaders by facilitating some of the other responsibilities that often take precedence over observing classes and providing instructional guidance. Being an instructional leader across multiple subject areas is no small task. It requires a depth of content understanding that few principals have an opportunity to develop. Both districts currently rely on the development of cadres of coaches who can provide that kind of guidance. And although both districts are investing in a pathway for instructional leadership development, both also need to address what happens to those leaders who continue to fall short of their goals, even after significant investment of resources and professional support.

Learning About Each Other's Systems in Order to Work Across Differences

As we begin to share the lessons of the Fresno–Long Beach Learning Partnership with others in the field, some assume that the Partnership's success is a result of the districts' similarities as urban systems. Although in agreement on their overarching goal, Fresno and Long Beach have

actually employed different change-management strategies. The choice of these strategies is the direct result of each superintendent's assessment of the culture, critical needs, capacity, and coalitions in each district's communities. As individual leaders, both Hanson and Steinhäuser talk about the culture of continuous improvement that drives them. Hanson talks about "openness to learning and a modeling of humility." Steinhäuser mentions "never being satisfied with the status quo." Although these two districts share common goals, each has its own unique culture that shapes its efforts to improve student achievement.

Long Beach, for example, has a long-standing culture that supports piloting change in a small number of settings, assessing the effectiveness of those changes, and then using positive results to build system-wide support. For example, the MAP²D initiative was developed by an individual mathematics teacher and then was implemented in only a few elementary schools before it was expanded into more schools. A similar approach to mathematics instruction has recently been implemented in middle schools in the district. Because the Long Beach district as a whole is familiar with and comfortable with continuous learning and improvement, Steinhäuser often consciously uses an incremental approach when introducing changes.

In Fresno, the situation is somewhat different. Student achievement is lower, so the need to make dramatic improvement is critical. Although a culture of continuous improvement is gradually taking hold, the district does not have a firm foundation of continuous improvement over time. Seeing the need to make significant improvement in the level of achievement in mathematics, the superintendent and other district leaders have moved forward rapidly to adopt a version of MAP²D for the entire district. Through extended visits and conversations across the two districts, Fresno learned from Long Beach's experience and made adaptations to the program and its implementation to suit Fresno's own context.

The Partnership supports these different change management strategies by providing a forum for the districts to examine results together. Collaboration, not competition, drives the work of the Partnership, and has made it possible for each district to seek help and support from the other when facing difficult challenges. As they share professional knowledge, use data, ask for critical

feedback, and work across their differences, they have become invested in each other's progress. For instance, in a recent quarterly Partnership meeting that included members of both district leadership teams, Fresno shared disappointing National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results, and both districts discussed possible solutions to addressing the achievement patterns that the NAEP results revealed.

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Additionally, after Fresno's first year of district-wide implementation of its math program, the data suggested that the reform had not worked as well as they hoped for English learners. Fresno district leaders shared their observations and discussed the achievement of Long Beach's English learners during one quarterly Partnership meeting. As a result of that conversation, both districts have redoubled their efforts to address the needs of English learners in mathematics.

Having these kinds of open dialogues requires a specific stance toward collaboration. All of the district leaders with whom we spoke pointed to this kind of candor as the primary strength of the Partnership. "If you're in it to say we're better than you or vice versa, that's the wrong mindset. Maybe it's because people see that they both have 'skin in the game,' so to speak," explained Steinhäuser; "They have to be open and honest about where they are. If they're unwilling to share the ugly truths about their systems, then they shouldn't get into a partnership. You need to talk about the stuff that people don't want to talk about."

Ensuring Staff and Governance Stability

The Partnership relies on the stability of staff—particularly the district-level staff who are building these relationships and carrying out the day-to-day work of the Partnership. Communication

occurs almost daily, with district partners communicating by phone and email. As we pointed out in our first brief, although the daily work of the Partnership is distributed across the three primary focal areas (mathematics, English learner instruction, and leadership development), the formal operations of the Partnership are vested with two individuals who have responsibility for managing and pushing the Partnership forward. In addition, the Partnership relies on stability of governance—the school board members whose support is essential to continuing the work. Communication with their boards is an essential element of the Partnership's success. In addition, there is no sustainability framework for the Partnership, which might mean that it is more vulnerable to shifts in staffing.

Meeting Fiscal Challenges

Both districts face serious challenges to maintaining their momentum in the current fiscal crisis. Although the Partnership has afforded some opportunities for increased efficiencies, the budget crisis might mean the elimination of some district staff—possibly the very staff who carry out the day-to-day work of the Partnership. Already, we have seen a number of personnel changes in district-level staff, and we will be following the impact of these changes in the months to come.

Seeking Policy Support

From a policy perspective, although there is great interest in the Partnership, it would be impossible to codify collaborations such as this through legislative policy. Indeed, Hanson points out that the Partnership is really about shared decision making and that it would be ironic to "mandate" such collaborations: "There's only a certain degree to which they can control or create the preconditions for work like this to take place." However, there may be opportunities for policymakers to support similar collaborations by providing funding for district-level professional learning, investing in technology that makes "virtual meetings" possible, or supporting data systems that make data sharing easier.

Conclusion

Our documentation suggests that successful partnerships provide opportunities to deepen leadership practices and develop leaders throughout district systems. Clearly, the Partnership is founded on the strong professional connections developed by these superintendents. Finding the right partner and developing structures that embed a partnership into priority areas of focus ensure that the work is built upon a strong foundation and that the work moves beyond the relationship of two leaders. Could district superintendents deepen their leadership strategies and accelerate their progress without such a partnership? Perhaps. But our documentation suggests that the Partnership is one important factor that contributes to the pace of improvement in both districts.

Although some aspects of this collaboration appear to create certain efficiencies, there are certainly trade-offs. Collaboration takes time—time to pick up the phone, time to compose and send an e-mail, and time to prepare for and attend quarterly meetings or school walk-throughs. This is why it is so critical that the Partnership is embedded in the day-to-day work of both districts. District staff with whom we have spoken all confirm that the Partnership reinforces their work, helps them look at their day-to-day challenges in a new way, and provides access to “critical friends” as they resolve their challenges together. Although collaboration can slow the pace of implementation as stakeholders gather at

the table to reach consensus, we have not seen examples where this Partnership has resulted in delayed implementation.

However, we do not want to suggest that the Partnership is only about collaboration or that the collaboration is seamless. Competition does provide some motivation for both districts. But it is not competition against one another. When asked what district qualities made a partnership such as this one possible, Hanson replies that, “We’re always trying to learn to get better. We look for lessons wherever we can get them. We’re competitive people, which is why we’re in these jobs. But our competition is more against the folks who don’t think we can do it than it is against other districts.”

It is too early to assess whether the Partnership’s efforts will be successful over time and become institutionalized so that they can carry on beyond the current individuals involved. It also will be important to determine the extent to which the overall leadership strategies and the work of the Partnership itself transform schools and classroom practice. Our next brief, focusing on mathematics instruction in the two districts, will explore some of these issues in greater depth. But we are encouraged by the fact that the leaders in these districts know how important it is to model what they expect of others by subjecting their own work to scrutiny and being held accountable for results.

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The California Collaborative on District Reform, an initiative of the American Institutes for Research, was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

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